

MY LADY'S MONEY

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

AS TOLD IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL
PART THE FIRST.

THE DISAPPEARANCE.

CHAPTER VI.

After about an hour in the drawing room, Mrs. Moody's maid came in to say that the dog had broken his collar. Lady Lydiard had been to the drawing room, and Mr. Hardyman had turned round to see the dog. Before the door was closed, he had turned round in all mouselike directions, or, in fact, had taken a last look at Isabel.

Having left the drawing room in a state of solitude, Lady Lydiard, on her return, found herself suddenly confronted with a gentleman who had obtained access to the drawing room.

The new visitor may be rightly described as a young man. He had gray hair, eyebrows and whiskers, in a gray coat, waistcoat and trousers, and gray gloves. For the rest his appearance was eminently suggestive of wealth and respectability, and in this case appearances were really to be trusted. The gray man was no other than Lady Lydiard's legal adviser, Mr. Troy.

"I regret, my lady, that I should have been so unfortunate as to startle you," he said, with a smile, "but I am here to give you news which may interest you. Please, Mr. Moody, make it brief; I want to tell you how gratefully I thank you for your kindness. But for you my life might have been dead by this time."

"At present Lady Lydiard cut short the interview, and, after a few moments' silence, said, "If you please, Mr. Moody, make it brief; I want to tell you how gratefully I thank you for your kindness. But for you my life might have been dead by this time."

"Lady Lydiard, in the quiet, melancoly room, which was half-lighted with the light of the fire, said, "Your ladyship need feel no further anxiety about the dog. Only be careful not to overfeed him. He will do very well for Miss Isabel's care. By the way, her name is Miller, is it not? Is she related to the Warwickshire Millers, of Ingoldsby Housers?"

Lady Lydiard looked at him with an expression of particular surprise. "Mr. Hardyman has said, 'this makes the fourth time you have mentioned me about Isabel. You seem to take a great interest in my little companion. Don't make any apologies, pray. You pay Isabel a compliment; and as I am very fond of her, I am naturally gratified when I find her admired.' At the same time she added, with one of her abrupt changes of tone, 'It had my eye on you and I had no idea he had any. We were talking in the most natural way, when you asked me about her. She is not in your line of business, and the sooner you know it the better. You make me laugh when you ask her if she is related to gentlefolks. She is the only daughter of a chemist in the country. Her relations haven't a penny to bless them, with the exception of an old aunt, who lives in a village two or three hundred miles away. I heard of the girl by accident. When she lost her father and mother, her aunt offered to take her. Isabel said: 'No, thank you. I will not go to live with a relation who is only an old woman. After twenty years' experience of you, you can't deceive me. You bring me bad news. Speak at once, sir, and seal it!'"

"Don't apologize, Mr. Troy," she said. "I am here for forgotten, you know, your malice, and for not keeping my nerves under proper control." She paused for a moment, and took a seat before she said her next words. "May I ask?" she resumed, "if there is something unpleasant in the business that brings you here?"

"Nothing, whatever, my lady; mere formalities, which can wait till tomorrow or the day after, if you wish it."

Lady Lydiard's fingers drummed impatiently on the table. "You have known me long enough, Mr. Troy, to know that I cannot be easily deceived. You have something unpleasant to tell me."

The lawyer respectfully remonstrated. "Really, Lady Lydiard," he began.

"It won't do, Mr. Troy. I know how you look at me on ordinary occasions, and I see how you look at me now. You are a very clever lawyer; but, happily for the interests that I commit to your charge, you are also a thoroughly honest man. After twenty years' experience of you, you can't deceive me. You bring me bad news. Speak at once, sir, and seal it!"

Mr. Troy yielded, inch by inch, as much as he could for his sake, and sent him instantly to the lawyer.

The lawyer made last effort to hold off the coming disclosure, a little longer. "Mr. Moody will be here directly," he said. "Mr. Moody requested me to prepare your ladyship's steward, Mr. Moody, in the meantime."

"Where is he?" Lady Lydiard interposed, angrily. "I can make him speak out, and I will send him here instantly."

The lawyer made last effort to hold off the coming disclosure, a little longer. "Mr. Moody will be here directly," he said. "Mr. Moody requested me to prepare your ladyship's steward, Mr. Moody, in the meantime."

"Will you ring the bell, Mr. Troy, or must I?"

Moody had evidently been waiting outside while the lawyer spoke for him. He saved Mr. Troy the trouble of ringing the bell by presenting himself in the drawing room. Lady Lydiard's eyes searched his face as he approached. Her bright complexion faded suddenly. Not many more passed her lips. She looked and waited.

In silence on his side, Moody laid an open sheet of paper on the table. The paper quivered in his trembling hand.

Lady Lydiard recovered herself first. "Is that for me?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady."

She took up the paper without an instant's hesitation. Both the men watched her anxiously as she read it.

The hair twirling was strange to her. The words were these:

"I very certify that the bearer of these lines, Robert Moody, by name, has presented me with the letter with which he was charged, addressed to myself, with the seal intact. I regret to add that there is, to say the least of it, some mistake. The inclosure referred to by the anonymous writer of the letter, who signs 'A Friend in Need,' has not reached me. No £200 bank note was in the letter when I opened it. My wife was present when I broke the seal, and can certify to this statement if necessary. Not knowing who my charitable benefactor is, I have written to the post office to give me any information. I can only take this means of stating the case exactly as it stands, and hold myself at the disposal of the writer of the letter. My private address is at the head of the page."

SAMUEL BRADSTOCK.

"Rector St. Anne's, Densbury, London."

Lady Lydiard dropped the paper on the table. For the moment, plainly as the rector's statement was expressed, she appeared to be incapable of understanding it. "What, in God's name, does this mean?" she asked.

The lawyer and the steward looked at each other. Which of the two was entitled to speak first? Lady Lydiard gave them no time to deliberate. "My lady," she said, sternly, "you took charge of the letter; I look to you for explanation."

Moody's dark eyes flashed. He answered Lady Lydiard, without caring to conceal his thoughts. "The suspicion of theft rests on your ladyship's adopted daughter, and on nobody else."

"Can't you speak more positively than that?"

"I can speak positively," said Lady Lydiard, with her eyes on the lawyer.

"Murry did mention the inclosure in the letter in Abel Miller's hearing as well as in mine." She paused, steadily controlling herself. "And what about Mr. Troy?" she added, with a smile and a quiver.

Mr. Troy answered quietly and firmly on his side. "I am surprised that your ladyship should ask the question," he said.

"I persist in repeating the question," Lady Lydiard rejoined. "I say that Abel Miller knew of the inclosure in my letter, and I ask, What of that?"

"And I answer," retorted the impenetrable lawyer, "that the suspicion of theft rests on your ladyship's adopted daughter, and on nobody else."

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